



# The Claremont *Letter*

Examining current issues in education highlighting the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

*This issue of the Claremont Education Letter focuses on education reform in Los Angeles and its lessons for all of us.*

## Educational Reform

by Charles Kerchner

Everybody *knows* what happened to educational reform in the Los Angeles Unified School District. As former mayor Richard Riordan once told me, "That's simple; LEARN failed." Indeed, the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Reform Now, which in the 1990s created a massive civic reform coalition, fell far short of building a district of semi-autonomous schools. When looked at as a project, it is easy to come to the conclusion that reform failed. Our research leads us to a different conclusion: that LEARN and other reforms were *part of a much larger change in the entire*

*institution of public education.*

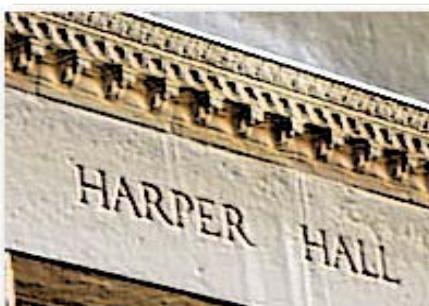
In the eyes of most reformers, LAUSD and other big school districts are insular worlds unto themselves, impenetrable and unchanging. But after two years of studying LEARN and the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), my colleagues and I concluded that the district was far from self-contained. It had become dependent on outsiders for many of its resources, much of its operating capacity, and increasingly for its policies. Federal and state governments, the courts, the unions, and society's *changing ideas and norms* about a good education created a school system that was reactive to outside forces rather than generative of its own change.

Looking at 40 years of history, we



saw an LAUSD altered in ways that challenged virtually every traditional assumption about how to govern and organize public education.

Most common assumptions about public schools are rooted in the Progressive Era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.



## School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 75 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

Progressivism swept the nation, establishing superintendents as in-charge professionals, rather than political appointees. Most school districts were given control of their own finances, and school boards were separated from city governments, which were looked upon as instruments of corruption and patronage. Pedagogy was freed from rote learning, and urban school districts in particular developed courses based on inquiry and problem solving. Los Angeles became a prime example. As historian Judith Raftery wrote, "By the mid-1920s administrative Progressives in Los Angeles had succeeded in remaking their school district on the model of the scientifically managed corporation."

The last 40 years illustrate the abandonment of these ideas. David Menefee-Libey (Pomona College, professor of politics), Stephanie Clayton, (CGU history M.A.), and I, found LAUSD had undergone a series of system shocks that drastically decreased its ability to chart its own course and that increased adverse external scrutiny. These system shocks set off a process of institutional change, of which the 1990s reforms were part.

The institution of public education includes schools and districts, to be sure, and it also spreads over several levels of governance and interest groups including employee unions and advocacy organizations. The California Department of Education, Arnold Schwarzenegger, George Bush, the NEA, the PTA, McGraw-Hill, and the Learning Disabilities Association are all part of it, as are hundreds of other persons and organizations. Institutions change infrequently and often during a *crisis* where it is believed that the existing institution is incapable of delivering what is expected of it. When a crisis occurs, a window of political opportunity opens for those with different ideas about the institution to take control.

We think public education is in the midst of institutional change, that it takes place in six steps, and that we can see it happening in LAUSD.

First, the reputation and legitimacy of the district was challenged. Through

the 1950s it was considered a shining example of public education, as were many large urban districts. But beginning with a desegregation lawsuit filed in 1963, the LAUSD was pictured as racially prejudiced, and increasingly as educationally incompetent. As time went on, everyone associated with the district was tarred with the brush of failure. Unions were seen as greedy, administrators as hapless, and the school board as self-interested and micro-managing. Reputationally, LAUSD and the rest of California went "from first to worst," as television journalist John Merrow put it.

Second, an exit strategy allowed the institution's most articulate watch-dogs to no longer be dependent on it. Suburbanization, white-and-middle-class flight, magnet schools, and later charter schools made it possible for the dissatisfied to leave. By the turn of the century, working class families were adopting the exit strategy that had formerly been used by the wealthier.

Third, the district's capacity was hollowed out. Tax revolts, unionization, an activist state government, and the dictates of federal legislation caused the district to lose control of its own finances, part of its personnel decisions, and its curriculum and pedagogy, raising the question of whether anyone was in charge.

Fourth, the district initiated its own reform plans, in part to save itself from breakup and to stave off vouchers. Proposals to decentralize the district can be traced to the 1960s. Beginning in the 1980s district task forces proposed radical shifts in organization and governance. These changes were not unlike the LAAMP and LEARN reforms in the 1990s.

Fifth, a crisis occurs. There has not yet been a defining crisis that allows new ideas about how public education should be governed and operated to gain sufficient political power to replace the old institution. Despite the many declarations of crisis in public education over the last 20 years, there has been no crisis so evident, or alternative so glowing, that the polity will form a new institution. Most current voucher and charter school ideas, though radical in intent, are destructive of the existing institution

without creating the infrastructure for new.

Sixth, someone writes an instruction book about how to operate in the new environment. Thomas Kuhn, who wrote about paradigm shifts in science, noted that one of the ways that one could tell that new ideas had come to the forefront was that texts would be built around them. People would go to school to learn how to operate within the new environment. LAAMP and LEARN tried to do this. They spent a large percentage of their budgets on professional education, but their ideas were never deeply accepted.

### Improvisation

So why does recognizing institutional change matter, and what should policy makers and practitioners do about it?

Finding one's self in the midst of large-scale institutional change is very disorienting: a bit like participating in improvisational theater. One reform idea after another is advocated with great certainty and then falls short.



"The faculty of the school of educational studies believes a socially just nation educates all its diverse citizenry through networks of effective and accountable organizations that interact responsibly with families and communities..."

-From our mission statement

## Creating The Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative

Over the last four years I have been privileged to follow the efforts of educators, community organizations, parents and others in forming an educational advocacy organization in the Boyle Heights neighborhood, just east of downtown Los Angeles. As the project's evaluator, a number of CGU students, faculty, and I have been chronicling its progress.

Boyle Heights is a fabled neighborhood, home to immigrants for more than a century. A string of luminaries claim Boyle Heights as home, including Los Angeles' new mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, the first Latino to hold that position in a century, and Harold Williams, who was later to be the president of the Getty Museum. Luis Rodriguez wrote about it in *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*, and it served as the setting for the excellent new play *Electricidad*—a Spanglish rendition of Sophocles' Electra.

Though rich in history, Boyle Heights remains economically poor and subject to gang violence. Despite recent substantial gains, school achievement is low. Its many community-based organizations have not coalesced. Even the promise of prosperity—propelled by a mass transit line and new housing construction—tears the fabric of the community more than it knits it. The hope of the Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative (BHLC) is to form a triangle of school improvement, grass roots organizing, and community organizations focused on education and community literacy. The original grant from the Annenberg Foundation is in its last year, and the collaborative is establishing itself as an independent non-profit.

There are great advantages of evaluating a project from its beginnings, rather than conducting a post-mortem. One experiences the drama and uncertainty of organization building. People come and go. They get sick. They get angry. But somehow work gets done. There is wisdom in understanding that organization building is not tidy.

We have followed the work using fieldwork techniques: videotaping, photo documentation, observation, interviews, and an occasional survey. We are beginning to put what we know on paper. Some highlights:

- **The Society of Students**, a youth development and resilience program, born of one teacher's vision, has now spread to several schools. SOS is gaining a national presence and was the subject of a report on the Newshour with Jim Lehrer. (View the video at <http://www.pbs.org>. Click on "Catch up on Past Stories," then "Society of Students.")
- **Transition Teams**. BHLC and the school district have created a curriculum and a summer school program to help students and parents successfully move from elementary to secondary schools.
- **Feria del Libro**. A book fair held annually at Roosevelt High School as a Latino counterpart to a similar venture held on the city's affluent west side. When it was started, the organizers thought that perhaps 1,000 people would show up; this year 15,000 attended.
- **Smart school**. Breed Street Elementary School, the seat of the grant, is turning itself into an authentic learning organization, where leadership roles are distributed, where time is created in the schedule for examining data and collaboration on lesson planning.
- **The collaborative** itself, which differs from most education support organizations. BHLC brings together people and organizations that have not historically worked with one another, even those who exhibit historic mistrust, such as parents and the Los Angeles Police Department.
- **Parent organizing**. Parents are learning the importance of schooling, how best to help their children succeed in school, and how to band together for political action.

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CGU doctoral student Laura Mulfinger is the co-research director of the evaluation. Recent graduates Michelle Tellez, June Hilton, DeLacy Ganley, Alejandra Favela, Sara Exposito, Weijiang Zhang and several other students have also been a part of the research team along with faculty members William Perez and David Drew.

Public attention then moves to the next reform, and observers reach the conclusion that reform doesn't amount to much. As one school reformer said, there's "lots of singing that doesn't add up to an opera." However, just as improvisational theater auditions new talent, improvisational school reform auditions new ideas. The challenge for shrewd policy makers and practitioners is to better understand their own histories and to create organizational order out of institutional chaos.

Over 40 years in LAUSD we found four reoccurring reform ideas. If one were to build around them, a new institution of public education would be born:

First: decentralization. A constant reform theme in Los Angeles has been to find ways to give autonomy to individual schools, or groups of schools. While none of these decentralization efforts has lasted, the idea of decentralization has reappeared in *every* reform program or challenge to the existing regime. It was present in school board elections in the 1960s and in the 1970 teachers' strike, which brought United Teachers of Los Angeles from a gadfly union to a powerful advocate. It was present in the district's own plans during the 1980s, and it was present in the LEARN and LAAMP reforms of the 1990s.

Second: grassroots participation and accountability. There have been continuing pressures for a community voice at the table and for involving parents as children's first educators. These violate the older tradition of schools governed by a community elite and deference to professionals in all matters educational. Reform experiments with community-based schools show that substantive parent involvement is possible, but only a few schools have been restructured around this principle.

Third: standards. Virtually every reform idea in the last 20 years has replaced attention to aptitude with high expectations for most all students. Aptitude education follows a bell curve; only some students are thought capable of high achievement. Beginning in the 1980s, California began to adopt standards, and incrementally it adopted testing and accountability measures that

were linked to those standards. The ideal of high standards for all creates political pressure for reaching them and more than a little nudge from the federal government to reach them quickly.

Fourth: choice. Beginning with the struggle to integrate in the 1960s, various forms of choice began to involve a significant number of students in the district. Students—mostly African Americans—were bused from their neighborhoods to relieve overcrowding in the central city, help boost attendance in the San Fernando Valley, and to somewhat achieve racial balance. Students also chose magnet schools based on the specialties offered or on the way the school was organized. As charter schools began in the 1990s, they became viable alternatives to conventional public schools. Gradually, the idea of choice attached itself to educational politics and became one of the reforms sought by those seeking to change the system. The form choice takes remains controversial. Voters twice rejected vouchers, but charter schools have gained increasing acceptance, and LAUSD has within it two “charter districts,” groups of schools that have semi-autonomous status.

### What Does This Mean That I Should Do on Monday?

These long-range trends have implications for short-range action.

Our study in Los Angeles clearly shows the district becoming an instrument of compliance where each law, regulation, or court decision is translated into an organizational silo with a separate set of regulations, funding stream, and enforcers. Specialized program knowledge has replaced organizational knowledge and distracted attention from the core mission of the schools. Principals feared compliance audits more than they feared low student achievement. Now, in the age of standards and assessments, they cope with both.

As we examined the historical

record, we were left with profound feelings about the inequity of power and responsibility. Responsibility has flowed down toward teachers, principals and superintendents. Power has become more centralized in the hands of governors, teacher unions, educational officials, and politicians.

The usual Monday morning reaction to this state of affairs is caffeine and commiseration. A better one would be thinking beyond compliance. I think every large school district would be well-served by hiring a person whose job it is to understand *all* its external mandates and sources of funds and to help the board and superintendent use these forces to push their organization where it wants to go.

This, of course, requires that a district actually have long-term direction and goals. While I am not a big fan of strategic planning, for it too often turns into an artificial exercise, there are plenty of opportunities for superintendents and principals to set the tone for schools and to focus energy on one or two things. The stronger the local identity, the more schools can use the winds of change rather than be buffeted by them.

Finally, institutional change offers great opportunity for policy makers and advocates to think beyond the bounds of the conventional institution. If the four reform trends we see—decentralization, choice, standards, and grassroots participation—are accurate reflections of what we want for our schools, then it becomes the task of policy makers to design an institution that provides those qualities. Task forces at both the city and state levels are beginning to consider alternatives. Doubtless, some of them will advocate breaking up the Los Angeles district.

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### Claremont Graduate University

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